The Rolling Recipes

a lesson in Sancocho warmth

FOOD
NARRATIVES
AND COOKING

THANOS KALAMIDAS

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Narrative:

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The Pan-American Highway road trip on a classic Norton 750 had brought me to Panama, a ribbon of asphalt promising adventure. But after weeks of relentless sun, cheap hostel beds and the constant hum of travel, a different kind of longing set in. It wasn't for a landmark or a beach; it was a deep, cellular craving for something that felt like *home*. My body, tired of roadside empanadas and quick petrol station sandwiches, was begging for nourishment of a different sort.

I found myself in the highlands of Boquete, the air sweet with cof-

fee blossoms and chilled by a persistent, drizzling mist. My hostel was a family-run affair, a chaotic, warm-hearted place where the matriarch, Señora Alma, ruled the kitchen with a quiet, formidable grace. That afternoon, the mist had seeped into my bones and I shivered openly in the common room.

Señora Alma clicked her tongue, a sound of both sympathy and mild disapproval. "You're hollow," she declared, not unkindly. "You need a *sancocho*. Not the café version. A real one."

The word meant nothing to me then. She saw the blank look and simply nodded. "Tomorrow. You will help me. You will learn."

The next morning, the kitchen was a temple of steam and profound, savoury scents. There was no written recipe. This was archaeology by aroma. On the worn wooden counter she had assembled her artefacts, a whole chicken cut into rustic bony pieces; knobbly, earthy-brown tubers she called *ñame* and *otoe*; green plantains, their skins like dark leather; and ears of corn, their kernels plump and pale yellow.

"This," she said, hefting a *ñame*, "is the heart. It will thicken the broth, give it body. It is not pretty but it is ...honest." She

showed me how to peel it, the flesh underneath surprisingly white and slick, releasing a clean, starchy scent. My first lesson, beauty in cooking is often hidden.

She placed a colossal pot, known as a *caldero*, on the flame. In went the chicken with a handful of coarse salt, covered with cold water. "We start with the foundation," she said. "The bones must speak first." And they did. A low, gentle simmer began a quiet conversation that filled the room.

As the broth burbled, she taught me to cut the *ñame* and *otoe* into substantial chunks. "They must not be shy," she instructed. "They are not guests in the soup; they are part of its land." The plantains were next, sliced into thick rounds. Finally, the corn, broken into manageable hunks.

"This is not a fast soup," Señora Alma said, her hands moving with a rhythmic certainty. "It is a *heavy* soup. *Sus-*

tancia. It carried our farmers, our builders. It mends tired souls." She added the vegetables in stages, the *ñame* first to begin its work of thickening, then the others. The brew transformed from a clear broth to a cloudy, promising potion.

The magic, she revealed, was in a simple paste: cilantro, garlic, and a touch of onion, ground in a pilón. "*Sofrito*," she called it. The fragrance when it hit the hot broth was explosive, a bright, green, fragrant shock that cut through the richness and made my stomach clench with anticipation.

Then, the waiting. For two hours, we sat at the kitchen table, she mending socks, me scribbling in my journal, bound by the pot's steady, percussive murmur. The steam painted the windows and the scent wove itself into our clothes, our hair; the scent of patience itself.

Finally, she ladled it into a deep bowl. It was not a delicate soup. It was a landscape in a dish, a golden, slightly viscous broth cradling generous, tender chunks of chicken, the starchy roots soft and comforting, the plantains sweet and substantial, the corn a juicy, crunchy prize. She placed a bowl of white rice on the side and a small dish of *ají*, a fiery chili sauce. "The rice is the canvas," she said. "The *ají* is your own signature."

The first spoonful was a revelation. It was more than food; it was a profound warmth that started in the mouth and radiated outwards. The broth was deeply chicken but elevated, herby, rounded, profound. The *ñame* had all but dissolved, lending a velvety weight that made each sip feel sustaining. I added a tiny dot of *ají* and a spark of heat lit up the depths of the flavour.

I ate slowly, steadily; my traveller's chill not just fading but being replaced with a glowing, core-deep heat. The fatigue, the hollow feeling, it all filled in with every spoonful. I understood then that *sancocho* wasn't just soup; it was culinary empathy. It was a pot designed to share, to restore, to ground you to the earth through its roots and its slow, deliberate making.

Señora Alma watched me, a small smile on her face. "You see?" she said. "Now you are not so hollow. Now you have a little piece of Panama inside you, not just a stamp in your passport."

She was right. I left Boquete with more than memories of volcanoes and coffee tours. I carried the knowledge of that *caldero*, the feel of the starchy *ñame* in my hand, the rhythm of its making. I had learned that the greatest comfort food isn't just about taste; it's about time, care, and the transformative power of a *heavy* soup that can, quite literally, put you back together again.

Chicken Sancocho recipe

with a Mediterranean touch

Ingredients

1 kg chicken thighs (bone-in, skinless) for maximum flavor.
1 large onion,
4 cloves of garlic,
1 large fennel bulb (sliced).
3 medium potatoes,
2 large carrots,
1 jar of artichoke hearts (drained).
150 gr. chickpeas (rinsed).
1.5L chicken stock, a pinch of saffron threads,
1 tsp smoked paprika (pimentón),
salt and black pepper.
Juice of half a lemon,
a handful of chopped parsley,
a drizzle of high-quality extra virgin olive oil.

How to make

1. Sear the Chicken: In a large pot, heat olive oil over medium-high heat. Brown the chicken thighs on both sides. Remove and set aside.

2. The Sofrito: In the same pot, sauté the onion, garlic and fennel until softened and fragrant (about 5 minutes). Stir in the smoked paprika and saffron for 30 seconds to wake up the oils.

3. The Simmer: Return the chicken to the pot. Add the potatoes, carrots and chicken stock. Bring to a boil, then reduce to a simmer. Cover and cook for about 20 minutes.

4. Add the Texture: Stir in the chickpeas and artichoke hearts. Simmer for another 10–15 minutes until the potatoes are tender and the chicken is falling off the bone.

    - Tip: Smash a few potatoes against the side of the pot to thicken the broth, mimicking the starchiness of a traditional Sancocho.

5. The Mediterranean Finish: Turn off the heat. Stir in the lemon juice and fresh parsley. Let it sit for 5 minutes.

6. Serve: Ladle into deep bowls. Top with a generous swirl of extra virgin olive oil and serve with a side of crusty sourdough bread instead of the traditional rice.

A Note on the Vibe

In a traditional Sancocho, you'd use guascas or cilantro for that earthy green taste. By using fennel and lemon you're pivoting toward the bright, acidic profile found in Greek or Southern Italian cooking, but the "soul" of the dish, the long-simmered chicken and potato, remains intact.

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Narrative: **Thanos Kalamidas**

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The Rolling Recipes are more than instructions; they are passports. Each dish carries the aroma of distant markets, the whispers of family kitchens and the indelible stories of culture, memory and the place that created it.

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